

Antichrist



-Father C C Martindale, SJ

Antichrist

When I was a small boy I was given a booklet about Antichrist. It purported to interpret Saint John's Apocalypse, and decided that the Seer had prophesied the career of Prince Jerome Napoleon, whose name it succeeded in adding up into 666, the Number of the Beast. On the back of this booklet were gory representations of a guillotine set up in the Place de la Concorde in Paris, France. It was surrounded by Catholic priests while vast crowds of people, stamped on their foreheads with the sinister number, were watching a select few, presumably all Huguenots, being led to execution. This book so frightened me that it became impossible to even go down the hall into which the door of room where it was kept opened, and I adopted all sorts of circuitous routes and a most inappropriate staircase to avoid it. The imaginations of thousands of children must, in past generations, have been similarly tortured, and though that is not likely to happen now, so has the grim old Protestantism disappeared from among us, it may be interesting to try to ascertain what really the Scriptures and Catholic tradition teach on the subject of Antichrist.

We cannot refer Catholic reads to any first-rate book directly on the point, but for those who can read French, Father F. Prat's fine work, *Theologie de St. Paul*, and Father Allo's quite admirable one on the Apocalypse place the whole matter in a proper light and illustrate it with an erudition that none could wish to better. We make no apology for not repeating in this booklet all the fantastic legends that have from time to time haunted the feverish imaginations of students or writers concerning Antichrist; it seems far better to state what is positive and right than to mention all sorts

of views, entertaining though they might be, merely to deny them.

The earliest writing in which the name *Antichrist* appears is the First Epistle of Saint John, and it recurs in his Second Epistle. Saint John says,

"Little children, it is the last hour, and even as you have heard that 'Antichrist is coming,' why even now many Antichrists have come into being. Whence we know that it *is* the last hour. They went out from among us, yet they were not from among us; for had they been from among us, they would have remained with us... I have not written to you because you do not know the truth. Who is the Liar if not he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the Antichrist - he who denies the Father and the Son. Everyone who denies the Son hath not the Father either. He who acknowledges the Son hath the Father, too." - *1st John 2:18-23*

"Beloved, do not trust every spirit, but test the spirits (to see) if they are from God, because many false prophets have come forth into the world. By this do you recognize the Spirit of God. Every spirit that acknowledges Jesus Christ come-in-the-flesh [incarnate] is from God; and every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus [or, divides Jesus] is not from God. And this is the spirit of the Antichrist, of whom you have heard that he is coming, and [in fact] he is already in the world." - *1st John 4:1-3*

"Now, many Deceivers have come forth into the world who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ come in the flesh. This is the Deceiver and the Antichrist." - *2nd John 7*

Saint John does not say here that what the Christians have heard about Antichrist is a *Christian* doctrine about

Antichrist; he does say that they are familiar with a doctrine on the subject, or at least a tradition. Nor does he say that there will ever be *an* Antichrist. But he affirms that the collectivity of those who deny the Incarnation, and the spirit that animates them, are Antichrist, and that this is already active in the world, and is a sign that we are even now in "the last days." Such "Anti-Christians" are in general those who deny the Incarnation, and in particular are heretics - men who once professed themselves Christians and have apostatized. If the reading "divide Christ" be the true one, he is alluding to those contemporary heretics who taught that our Lord was not truly one Person, God and Man, but (perhaps) a man on whom the Spirit of God had descended, e.g. at the Baptism, or, true God indeed, but merely surrounded with a sort of phantom body. There may be more Christian doctrine than this, concerning Antichrist; but Saint John does not state it here, but rather obviously, to our mind, refrains from sanctioning explicitly any current belief about the coming of an Antichrist.

Saint John's epistles, which may have been written about AD 90 or 95, recall at once a passage in Saint Paul's 2nd Epistle to the Thessalonians, written in AD 51:

"We beg you, brethren, for the sake of the Advent of our Lord Jesus Christ and of our gathering together unto Him, not to be swiftly tossed out of your wits nor to be scared, whether by means of a spirit [in the concrete, prophecy], or preaching, or by a letter quoted as coming from me [this may mean, by a forged letter, purporting to come from me; or, by means of a letter, i.e. my own first one to you, so that as it were through me myself you had been scared], to the effect that the Day of the Lord is imminent. Let no one deceive you in any way; for unless the Apostasy have come first, and the Man of Lawlessness be unveiled, the Son of Destruction, the

Antagonist, he who exalts himself over all that can be called God or Worshipful, so as to set himself down in the Temple of God, exhibiting himself *as being* God - (the End shall not come). Do you not remember that while I was still with you I told you this? And you know, too, That which is holding [him] in, so that he shall be revealed [only] at his proper time. For the Mystery of Lawlessness is already at work - let but him who holds [it] in so far, be removed out of the way. Ah! then shall be unveiled the Lawless One, whom the Lord Jesus shall destroy with the breath of His mouth, and shall bring to naught by the manifestation of His Advent - even him whose [own] 'advent' is according to the activity of Satan with all [sorts of] power and signs and lying miracles, and with all sorts of wicked deceit unto those who are destined to destruction, because they have not accepted the love of the truth unto their salvation. And that is why God sends them an activity of deception [practically, a tendency or bias towards being deceived] so that they should believe the Lie." - *2nd Thessalonians 2:1-12*)

It is certain that Saint Paul here is not even *meaning* to speak very clearly. He had told something to the Thessalonians to which he alludes in veiled language, because it may be dangerous for him or for them to write about it in so many words. So we shall be wise not to try to decipher him - to de-code him, so to say - with the help only of such clues as his letter taken by itself provides, but to see if similar language is used elsewhere in a clearer way. Somewhat similar *ideas* will be expressed, no doubt, by Saint John in his Apocalypse, written about half-way between saint Paul's letter and Saint John's own first epistle; but the Apocalypse is itself obscure, and Saint Paul, by quoting Daniel (11:36 in verse 4 of this chapter) shows that he is using a traditional language that our Lord Himself

made use of when speaking of the "last days." What Saint Paul does say is that the End of the World is not due till much has happened first - there is to be an Apostasy; and the Advent of Christ will be prefaced by a pseudo-advent, accompanied with deceptive miracles, and that he, or "that" which thus "comes" is here and active already - or would be so, were he, or it, not held in check. When he, or "that," which now acts as check, is removed, then will be the manifestation of the Antagonist. This is where Paul goes nearest to the word Antichrist. His word, *anti-keimenos* means, practically, He who establishes himself against - a kind of (evil) counterpart, like convex to concave, though the "evilness" is not contained in the word itself, but is implied by the fact that this Power acts lyingly and in opposition to Christ by whom it will ultimately be destroyed. Add that this *is* not the Devil, though it works *for* him. We must wait to see what more than this is implied in Saint Paul's words.

But our Lord Himself had quote Daniel:

"When therefore you shall see the Abomination of Desolation, which was spoken of through Daniel the prophet, standing in the [a] holy place (let him that readeth understand) - then let him that is in Judea flee into the mountains, etc. There shall arise false Christs and false prophets, and shall show great signs and wonders, so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect."
- *Matthew 24:15*)

It is clear that our Lord, too, alludes to the words of Daniel, though Saint Paul makes them a little more explicit, and He exhorts readers to apply their intelligence and discern their true meaning, which He does not make obvious any more than Saint Paul does. But He goes on to say that this will be the preface to the siege and destruction of Jerusalem, and

after that, of the End of the World and the Last Coming of the Messiah, though He definitely asserts that no man knows the *date* of this - only it shall be sudden, which is exactly what Paul teaches.

Our Lord then refers us back to Daniel. In chapter 7 we read of four wild beasts (who are four successive empires), and from the fourth rises a king who shall speak "great - i.e. insolent - things," shall speak "words" against the Most High, and "wear out" the Saints of the Most High. This persecution lasts "a time, times, and half a time," that is, three and a half years. After his death and defeat comes the triumph of God and of the holy People. In chapter 8 another vision shows a king who waxes great "even to the prince of the host," who takes away the daily sacrifice and gives sanctuary and people alike to be trampled under foot for the space of 1150 days. This even is alluded to in verse 13 as "the abomination of desolation" - possibly, the Abomination that Desolates. Again in Daniel, in chapter 9, a vision further shows the daily sacrifice taken away from Jerusalem for "half a week" - in Daniel's language here, this means three and a half years - and of that period a phrase is used that seems best translated, "and on the pinnacle of abomination (shall stand) one that maketh desolate." After this, the conqueror is in his turn defeated. In chapter 11 the wicked king shall "profane the sanctuary, and shall take away the continual burnt offering, and they shall set up the abomination that maketh desolate." This king, moreover, shall magnify himself above every god, and shall speak marvelous things against (i.e., blaspheme) the God of gods. But he comes to a sudden and disastrous end; the Judgement and the Resurrection follow, and God and His People triumph.

In Isaiah 11:4 God is described as "slaying the wicked" as the last Day "with the breath of His lips" (quoted by Saint Paul above); and in chapter 14 it is definitely the King of

Babylon who exalts his throne above the stars of God, saying, "I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like unto the Most High" - and in Ezekiel 28 it is the King of Tyre who, God says, has "lifted up his heart," and has said, "I am a god, I sit in the seat of God...yet thou art man, and not god"; and similarly, in Daniel the wicked blasphemous king who, for a while, conquers the Holy City and replaces the divine sacrifice with an abomination, is throughout, we hold, Antiochus Euphron. This king after being, for fourteen years, a hostage at Rome succeeded to the throne of Syria in 175 BC. In 172 he marched against Jerusalem, took it, and stripped the Temple of its treasures, though hitherto he had been on good terms with the High Priest who had been ready to co-operate with Antiochus's scheme of introducing Greek culture into Palestine. However, hearing a suspicion of treachery, he attacked it as we have said. In 168 BC the city was even worse devastated, the men were killed, the women and children sold into slavery, and the city burned and its walls pulled down. Antiochus then decreed that "all should be one people," even in religion. Observance of the Sabbath and circumcision were forbidden on pain of death; on 15 December 168, a small altar was built upon the altar of burnt sacrifice and sacrifice was offered on it to Olympic Zeus. In the first book of the Maccabees this altar is called by Daniel's expression, *The Abomination of Desolation*. Now the first of these words is, no doubt, constantly used in the Old Testament of idolatrous practices, etc., but taken together the words make, in Hebrew, a very good "pun" or assonance with the words meaning Ball of Heaven, which is the Hebrew equivalent for Zeus Olympios, Antiochus's patron deity, whose image, no doubt, was placed on the altar, and was also, no doubt, identified more or less closely with Antiochus himself. This desecration lasted till 25 December 164.

Antiochus put, then, an image of himself, as incarnating his Empire, fashioned in the likeness of Zeus Olympios, in the Temple itself, and this was treated with divine honours. The Jews never forgot this desecration of the Temple, invitation to Idolatry, and to apostasy from the Vocation to be God's unique and chosen People.

Clearly we have no space to go into more details than this. But it is certain that Daniel's phrases became part of a recognized style, which was used by writers who may be called Apocalyptists, and must now be explained.

Any careful reader of Daniel will see at once that he does not intend to refer only to Antiochus Euphianes. He sees, behind the invading pagan king, the forces of right and wrong, of God and His enemies. You may say that a writer like Daniel will have four *planes*, so to call them, in his vision - he will see something quite concrete; like this or that king, this or that invasion or persecution, and this may be called the historical level; or, he may see the conflict of right and wrong, and this is the ethical or moral level or plane; or, he may see all this at its consummation, at the End of the world, and this is called the *eschatological* (*science of the last* or *science of the end*) plane; finally, he may see the history of the world, or of the soul, as it were universally, and no more than typified or symbolized by any particular conflict, and the triumph of God in the whole series of creation. This might, perhaps, be called the universal or cosmic plane. Such a writer will find his gaze focusing and refocusing itself very rapidly, sometimes nearer, sometimes at a more distant point, or rather, now on the more concrete, and now on the more spiritualized plane. Isaias, then, and Ezekiel saw not only the impious triumph and ultimate defeat of the kings of Babylon and of Tyre, but God's triumph and that of His People and of righteousness; Daniel saw beyond Antiochus, though his gaze was primarily fixed on

him; our Lord, we dare reverently to say, was using this same traditional way of speaking, with its accustomed formulae, which Jews of His time perfectly well understood, when in the concrete and immediate future He saw and spoke of the sack of Jerusalem by the Roman armies, but, also, the ultimate fate of the world and the last great contest of good and evil, and the triumph of the former and of His Church.

Does the Old Testament, then, so far teach, or even lead us to expect, an individual person who, *at the end of time* shall act as an evil counterpart to the Messiah, or even as the professed supreme enemy of God? No. The inspired writers proclaim the world-enduring struggle of good and evil, and the ultimate triumph of good, and they sometimes express this in terms of warfare, and in particular under the symbolism of, or as working itself out in, a contest actual or in the more or less remote future - thus serving the double purpose of instructing the Chosen People in what might pedantically be called the spiritual interpretation of the universe, and of encouraging them in view of a crisis in their national history sooner or later to be experienced by them. For the imaginative standpoint, or that of dramatic appropriateness, it will be clear how naturally the great Protagonist, God, could be represented as ultimately confronting an individual for; but the canonical writers do not do this; the drama, thus set forth, developed outside them.

All prophets foretold, at times, the future, and also exhorted the people, and variously "forthtold" God's word. But those who by preference "unveiled" the underlying spiritual truth of things, particularly with reference to the End of the World, and often in the hour of the Chosen People's disasters when it needed special encouragement, and, finally, as a rule, in a very special symbolical "dialect," have come to be called

"Apocalyptists," owing to Saint John's great writing, which was the first document of the sort, I think, to bear the name of Apocalypse. Almost all prophets contain apocalyptic *passages*: but, during the century and a half both preceding and following the Christian era, there were many entire books which were Apocalypses. Those which Saint John, and perhaps Saint Paul, may have known, since they were written before their date, were The Book of Jubilees, The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, the Ethiopian Enoch, the Slavonic Enoch, and the Assumption of Moses, and parts also of the Sibylline Oracles. Roughly contemporary with Saint John are the Fourth Book of Esdras, other parts of the Sibylline Oracles, the Apocalypse of Abraham, etc. Later are the Odes of Solomon, the Apocalypse of Peter, Shepherd of Hermas, etc.; and others much later, like the Apocalypse of Paul. In many of these there are Christian elements, and it is in these classes of literature that the motif of the Antichrist is developed.

One element in it is the advent of a pagan chieftain; the kings of Babylon, Tyre and Syria were followed by Herod the Great, Pompey or some Roman emperor (like Gaius (Catigula), and with quite extraordinary consequences as we shall see after the sensational reign of Nero); and this facilitated the idea that the Enemy of God should manifest himself in Jerusalem itself, since these personages either took and dismantled it, or were expected to do so. There was also a tradition that this enemy should be an apostate Jew, perhaps from the tribe of Dan. There was a different idea, which seems to have been felt as more than a mere metaphor, that the enemy should be Satan himself, either incarnate, or at least acting through a definite lieutenant. Thus, in the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs and the Assumption of Moses, it is Belial, or Satan or the Devil who is overthrown or bound by God or the Messiah; whereas, in the Psalms of Solomon, Pompey is described as the Dragon. In

the last case, we can see how the two motifs are intertwining; Satan and his instrument are not clearly distinguished. We may interpolate here that non-Catholic writers are fond at this point of assigning pagan origins to this idea, and to the imagery in which it is clothed. Thus the whole idea of a fight between God and the principle of Evil is supposed to be Persians, and all dragon-imagery, etc., is supposed to be borrowed from Babylonian myth. Enough to say that at this date the Jews not only had no need to borrow any such metaphors at all, for they had long possessed them, but the metaphors themselves were very natural ones to be developed precisely when the Jews were continually being attacked and defeated; and, that they were almost as unlikely as actual Christians to borrow religious ideas from others just when the sense of their peculiar privileges and vocation was felt more and more intensely by them; while not only had this imagery long been traditional in substance, but meant no more to a Jew than the word "Titan" did to Milton when he so described the archangels Gabriel and Abdiel; not would we ourselves be committed to any kind of belief in the storming of Olympus by the Giants if we spoke of the gigantic struggle of right with wrong.

We are now, I think, in a much better position for understanding Saint Paul whose letters to the Thessalonians come next in chronological order. Saint Paul's language is certainly both "eschatological" and in part "apocalyptic." We may, then, almost assert that they are *certainly* wrong who try to make him allude either to a contemporary concrete fact alone, or to the ending of the world alone. It is extremely probable that he will be alluding, indeed, to the consummation of all things (as, indeed, he obviously does), *and* to some present or imminent hostile influence or person. (This view will be immensely corroborated when we speak of Saint John's Apocalypse.) suppose Paul were alluding only to a contemporary person, he would not only be expecting the

consummation of the world to be destined to occur within the life-time of that person (for all that was necessary for his "manifestation" and full persecuting activity was the removal of a certain mysterious "check"), but asserting that it *would* so occur whereas the whole point of the letter is that no one has any idea when it will occur, and he is warning the Thessalonians *not* to act as if it were known to be imminent. Moreover, though this is not the place to argue this matter out, I hold that Saint Paul did not think that the End was to come immediately, or even soon, and, in fact, that while he continued to fix no dates, he thought it was very far off indeed, as we reckon "far." For from the 11th chapter of the Epistle to the Romans he seems to say definitely that the conversion of the Jews is to take place before the end (and even then he does not say, or hint, that it is to take place *just* before), and that before this conversion, the Gentiles, that is, the world at large, are to have been converted. But it is certain that he did not expect to convert the world in his own life-time, or anything like. To my mind, then, Paul is very likely considering some actual persecuting agency, held for the time being in check, but likely soon to break out, *and*, the enduring series or collectivity of such agencies, continually checked until for a brief space the restraining power is withdrawn, *and*, finally the consummation of the world-long struggle between god and all that is anti-God, and the divine triumph.

What, then, on this hypothesis, does Saint Paul regard as the contemporary evil influence which is "from now on," "already," energizing, but held in check for the while? And that is it that holds it in check? I think he almost certainly saw that within the Roman Empire was a tendency, already operative, which very soon revealed itself, to set itself up, as it were, incarnate in its Emperor, as absolute and supreme even in the realm of conscience. To refuse to worship the Emperor meant that one made one's life, in army, in

commerce, in society, in the rapidly developing bureaucracy, unlivable, and at frequent crises, involved oneself in actual martyrdom. What was at the moment restraining this influence? Perhaps the personality of the contemporary Emperor himself, Claudius, who did not like Emperor-worship, and reacted against the policy of his mad predecessor Gaius; or, the spirit of the governing class of officials, who had not yet yielded, as they did later, to the insane orgy of flattery with the Emperor became surrounded. But since Saint Paul uses the vague neuter both for the "mystery of Lawlessness," and for "That which acts as check," *as well as* the masculine, and since the Old testament models are at least as much a collectivity of enemies as any one man, thought they may be led by, summed up in, or typified in, one man, and since it will be seen that Saint John uses his personal symbols to stand for such a collectivity quite as much as, and more than, for an individual, we take it that saint Paul also alludes here to that enduring Opposition to the Triumph of God. This is ever appearing to come to a head, is ever defeated, or at least checked in part and for a while, primarily by the Christian preaching and supernatural influence, and is destined to be utterly overwhelmed by the Truth as revealed by the Son of God Incarnate, the Messiah, the Word made Flesh. I will add that it is quite possible that saint Paul's mind, moving thus in a real of apocalyptic thought, may have had in it, as Father Prat holds, the very special apocalyptic symbolism connected with the archangel Michael. This would make another link with the Apocalypse. The floating thought of the Jews not only set God, or the Messiah Himself, in opposition to the Anti-Messias, or to Satan, but also Saint Michael. Not only in the extra-canonical apocalypses does Michael play a great role, but in the book of Daniel itself Michael is the leader of God's armies and takes the Chosen People in charge (chapters 10 and 12). Paul certainly had him in mind when he describes the Last day, and "at the

voice of an archangel, at the sound of a trumpet," the dead rise. Not only was Michael regularly conceived as the great protector of the Chosen People in battle, especially the last Battle, but in pre- and post-Christian apocalypses he is seen as a Recording Angel, setting down the works of nations and their presiding angels, and is held to have been the medium through whom God gave the law to Moses, and the constant intercessor on behalf of humanity, the mediator between God and the race on behalf of the peace of Israel; while in the letter of saint Jude he is seen fighting with Satan for the body of Moses, and in Saint John's apocalypse it is he who carries on the great mystical war with Satan. So Paul, on yet another plane of thought, may here well be seeing the World-Struggle in terms of a fight between Satan and the Archangel, and Michael will then be the "check."

Not long after these letters of Saint Paul were written, the career of the Emperor Nero startled the world. Genius, artist, actor, evidently a man of fascinating charm, under the frantic adulation of his court, the omnipotence of money and absolutism, he quite lost his balance, and became a hideous assassin and a god. In 67, he committed suicide. None could believe him dead. The idea of Nero had penetrated right below the sheaths of the Empire's soul. Tacitus and Suetonius show that he was held, for long, to be still alive. More than one pretender was able, in the east, to maintain his claim to be Nero. Such a one was actually supported for some time by a Parthian general, Artaban. The fact that Nero was, after all, obviously dead made not the slightest difference. He would rise again, or at least the devil himself would take the form of Nero and appear among men. This last suggestion comes, of course, from the Jews, whose apocalypses become full of the idea. On the whole, it was held that he would come from the East, from beyond the Euphrates, and I may add at once that at least a connection

between Antichrist and Nero was frequently and early admitted even by Christian writers.

It is now easier to approach the next great Christian document, Saint John's Apocalypse.

In chapter 4 we are told that persecution has already raged and produced its martyrs, but they are to wait for a little longer till their number be made full. In chapter 9 we have the double symbolic vision of an army of evil spirits coming from the abyss, having for chief "the angel of the abyss, whose name in Hebrew was *Abaddon*, in Greek, *Apolluon*," the *Destroyer*, and of the invading army of cavalry from beyond the Euphrates, whom we have reason to regard at least on the immediate and historic place as the Parthians, of whose onslaught the Empire stood in continual dread. Then, in chapter 11, John sees the sack by the "Beast of the Abyss" of the Holy City, Jerusalem, all but its innermost shrine; even during the worst hours, Two Witnesses to God and His Truth come forth and preach, but after a while they too are killed and the enemies of God congratulate one another and think they have triumphed. But the Witnesses are restored to life, and their foes are discomfited. Their death had lasted for 3 ½ days as compared to the 3 ½ years of the total persecution. (Throughout the Apocalypse, John uses 3 ½ years, 42 months, or 1260 days, as identical in meaning and as symbolizing "persecution-time," on the model set by the persecution of Antiochus Epiphanes.) In the second part of the Apocalypse, which begins in chapter 12, is seen the Great War between Michael and Satan, and the replica of this on earth, that between Satan's representatives and the Church. The War is actually waged there by a Wild Beast who combines in his one self all the characteristics of the various wild beasts, portraying successive empires, mentioned by Daniel. He holds an authority delegated to him by the Dragon, who is Satan, and

just as the name of Michael means *Who is like to God?*, so the Beast's war-cry is *Who is like to the Beast?* His power over the Saints of God last 3 ½ years; his mouth speaks "great things and blasphemies"; one of his seven heads is seen "slain unto death," but this death-stroke had been healed. And the world went gaping after him. This Beast had, he too, a lieutenant, a Beast that came not "from the sea," but from the mainland, and was partly like a lamb. His business was to induce the world at large to worship the first Beast, of whom he made an animated Image that spoke, and he worked all sorts of miracles in the name of the first Beast, and on the forehead and right hand of all who worshipped the image he caused to be stamped the number of the Beast, 666, and those who had it not could neither buy nor sell, and they who would not worship were killed. John then sees the triumph of the elect, and the Judgement. Again, in chapter 15 he sees the way opened for the kings from beyond Euphrates, and the dragon, the Beast, and the second Beast, here called the False Prophet, gathered together with their troops from all sides to a final battle, and the ruin of the Great City, Babylon. Again, chapter 17, he is shown the doom of that city now under the symbol of the World-Wanton, seated on a beast with seven heads and covered with blasphemous names. The Beast, parodying the Eternal God who "Was, and Is, and Shall Come," "was, and is not, but shall come (again)." As for the heads, they are, says John, the Seven Hills of that city where the woman has her throne; but also, seven kings, of whom five have been, one is (now), another is not yet come, but shall rule for a short space, and - the Beast is himself an Eighth, though he is *also* one of the Seven. Then John sees the ruin of the harlot city; the Beast survives her, only himself ultimately to perish along with this false prophet, and last of all Satan himself is destroyed.

There is today, we think, no danger of anyone supposing that the visions of the Apocalypse are meant to represent a series of historical events succeeding one another chronologically. John relates the same thing again and again under different symbols, rather as at least once he uses the same symbol (the Beast's heads) for different things - hills and kings. It is true that in re-relating under a new symbol what he had already told, he has usually altered the focus of his gaze somewhat, and is contemplating truth on a different place. Thus, in the first part of the Apocalypse he may be said to remain on all but the most general place of all, and to contemplate great principles rather than historical events, save quite in passing, as when he declares the number of the martyrs to be not yet full, and has, I think, an eye briefly turned towards the group of martyrs slain under Nero, and not yet followed by those to be slain by Domitian. In the double vision of the Angel of the Abyss, and of the Parthians, he certainly has the City and Empire of Rome in his mind, as representative of evil, but goes into no great detail. Under the image of the siege of the Holy City, he tells certainly that for a while the forces of evil seem to defeat Christ's Church, though they do not quite succeed in annihilating it; true, they get rid of the continual witness that infuriates them, but even then the success is only apparent and brief, for the remnant of the Church has new life given to it, and the triumph of evil is neither complete nor lasting. Here the detail of "persecution-period" is introduced.

Each vision, it may be noticed, offers a new detail which fits it in, from a literary point of view, to the next ones, and each becomes more focused on to actual life than the preceding one was. But hitherto, nothing like an "Antichrist," save in the most vague and general sense, has been mentioned. This is what the second part of the book supplies. We are shown first in a most general symbol the attack of the

Dragon upon the Messiah, and the war on His behalf captained by Saint Michael. Then the scene is shifted to the earth, and the Dragon's Viceroy, the Beast from the Sea, and that Beast's own delegate, the Beast from the land, are seen persecuting the Church. There is no doubt about the first Beast. It is the persecuting Roman Empire. And to my mind there is no doubt, or very little, about the second Beast. It is, immediately, proconsular power in Asia that "played up" to the Emperor, saw to the exhibiting everywhere of his images, and worked, quite possibly, imitation miracles and even ventriloquial effects in connection with them. Unless a man did acts of divine homage to the Emperor in the person, so to say, of his image, he was boycotted and cast out of social life, and in course of time persecuted to death.

Does John fix his eye, here, on any particular Emperor? He seems to do so when he says that the Beast has a "number," which is "that of a man," namely, 666. In Hebrew and in Greek, numbers were represented by letters - *1* by *a*, and so forth. Into whatever number the letters of a man's name added up, that was *his* number. This game, for so it almost was, occurs very often in the Sibylline Oracles among apocalyptic books, but also in quite ordinary life it was common. In *Or. Sib.* 1:324-331, the name of *Jesus* is given as 888; and it is thought at least possible that the number of Antichrist was 666. Anyhow, the words *Nero Caesar* in Hebrew give the total 666, and in Greek, 616, which is a variant reading of 666, as Saint Irenaeus testifies, in the Apocalypse. Now by the further "game" called *isopsephia*, or "equal reckoning," if the number of a man's name could be shown as identical with that of a word expressing a quality, etc., that man would be said to have that quality. So if the name *Nero Caesar* added up into 666, and also the number of Antichrist was 666, it would follow that Nero was Antichrist, and, indeed, as such he was often to be exhibited to the reprobation of future generations.

There are difficulties that beset every single explanation of this subject; but the above seems at present far the most probable, and is reinforced by what Saint John says when he describes the Harlot. There the Beast is represented as the Empire, or at least the Imperial Force or spirit supporting the City of Rome: it had parodied the Lamb, the Son of God, who had been slain and risen again, by itself suffering apparent defeat and returning to life, as indeed the Empire may be said to have done after the collapse which seemed total after the death of Nero, and the revival that followed in the persons of the Flavian Emperors. But in particular John tells of the seven heads of the Beast as being seven kings, of whom five had already ruled; a sixth was actually on the throne, a seventh was still to come, but should have but a brief reign; and then the Beast himself should be, says John, an eighth, and yet be one of the seven. Those who have the patience to look up the book *Princes of His People II*, which I have several times mentioned, will find reasons that allow of our safely saying that the kings, calculating from the Emperor Augustus, bring us to Domitian for the eighth in their series: now Domitian was everywhere nicknamed the Resurrected Nero, and was really thought to be, by some, a reincarnation of that Emperor, so savage was his policy. In him, the whole spirit, then, of the Empire, seemed once more to be that of Nero, so that in myth and in fact he was, or acted as, not only "the eighth," but as one of the seven, i.e. Nero. All the same, it is noticeable that John cannot shut up his thought into the person of one Emperor or even period, or of one Empire; for the Beast survives the city Rome and is not conquered till the end of time. John does no more than see Nero (who certainly is in his mind) and Domitian (who perhaps is) as types of a policy - examples of persecution proper to pagan Rome. His eye is on this plane far more occupied with the whole series of Emperors and the whole persecuting work of Rome, than with any particular man.

See then the levels in John's thought - the Christ-persecuting Emperors of Rome, as represented by Nero in particular of their type; the "Romes," or persecuting powers of all ages, be they cities, systems of thought, principles, ideals, or what you will; and floating above them all, the tremendous figures of the archangel Michael and of Satan. Constantly, the Church appears to be on the verge of annihilation; even while there is a "check" upon that total defeat, be this "check" symbolized as Michael, or the Two Witnesses, or seen in a particular man or policy or some existing political or philosophical system - the evil influence is still at work; a moment of great weakening on the part of the Christians suffices for the full "revelation," as Saint Paul calls it, of that evil influence; it seems to score a triumph of the completest sort, but is then itself defeated - absolutely, at the last day, when Satan, whose representatives all these earthly persecuting man, influences, legislations are, shall be bound for ever along with his wicked servants. Thus, to start with, the harmony of Saint Paul and of Saint John is seen to be complete. Satan is engaged in his enduring war against God; that anti-God influence is throughout history felt upon the earth; it has at all times its particular representative. The battle sways to and fro; sometimes the Beast seems stricken to death; but it revives; sometimes, the Christian Witness and the sources of Grace, that inhibit the full triumph of evil, are for a space apparently destroyed - there is Apostasy, and the anti-Christian foe is fully revealed; but at the last the Word of God, Eternal Truth, will make an end of these lying doctrines that set the world astray.

Have either John or Paul prophesied the Advent of a definite individual Antichrist at the end of time? No. There is certainly nothing to prevent our surmising that the enemies of God may be led or represented by an individual, at the end of human history just as at any other time; indeed, since

the "End of the World," and the events surrounding it, must necessarily occur as historical events, it seems equally necessary that they must express themselves in something concrete, either a man, or a group, or a political or systematic unit of some sort; but the Old Testament, Saint Paul, and Saint John use their image of a definite one person precisely when their gaze is fixed rather on their own time, which is, in a sense, the least "real," most transitory, plane of all those that they contemplate. Babylon, Tyre, Antiochus, Rome - and all the persecutors of all history for ever, are but the crude material examples of a much deeper and abiding truth, just as the Two Witnesses stand as symbol of that residue of the Faithful who never cease their promulgation of God's truth even in the worst of persecution, and, "though they be dead, yet shall they live," as Our Lord promised; and just as we ought not to try to tie them down to definite personalities, like Moses and Elias, Elias and Enoch, Peter and Paul, so neither should we seek to assign a definite individual as the captain of the enemy host that forever bears hard upon them.

These conclusions would have to be modified were there a consistent patristic or ecclesiastical tradition concerning the Antichrist, and different in scope. But here is not. To being with, the Apocalypse so startled the imagination of Christians that any speculations about Antichrist were based almost wholly on that book. But its obscurity served it, so to say, a bad turn. For many people gave it up, as we are apt to, in despair, and other found in it justification for unjustified ideas of their own. For example, those who had imbibed from other sources the belief that Christ was to reign 1000 years upon the earth before the End, had certain sentences in the Apocalypse which they could quote in their support. This, we think, is largely why the Apocalypse took so long to make good its claim to be included in the canon. Having suffered, then, this sort of eclipse, it became the

prey of every kind of guesswork. The earliest writers, who do not seem to have sought for any general method of interpreting the book, also seem to mingle a due recognition that the Beast is the Roman Empire, with the idea that the Antichrist will be a personage appearing at the End, and acting as the Beasts in the Apocalypse and in Daniel do. But these writers are accessible to us only in fragments or quotations, or at least do not treat *ex professo* of the Apocalypse. Victorinus, Bishop of Pettau, wrote two commentaries on the Apocalypse, but he belongs already to the third century; he still believes in the millennium, though Saint Jerome, who edited his shorter commentary, corrects this and holds that the Beast is Nero who will be resuscitated by God as Antichrist and king of the Jews. But this writer is of enormous importance as being the first we possess who makes it clear that Saint John's visions do not display historical events in chronological order, but the same events or ideas under different, more complete forms.

Tyconius, an African schismatic, about 380 wrote a commentary which orthodox Fathers esteemed most highly, having but to purge it of the passages that related to the Donatist schism in particular. He regards the "Witnesses" as the Church with her two testaments; the Beast with its seven heads is the totality of the powers that oppose Christ, which shall be concentrated in some sense in the last King of Satan's city. He makes it most clear that John takes up the same subject again and again. Saint Jerome at least makes it clear that he held no method of explanation or particular interpretation to be traditional. Saint Augustine holds that there will be a personal Antichrist, but this is due rather to Saint Paul than to Saint John, especially as he reads "apostate" instead of "apostasy" in the Epistle to the Thessalonians. The Beast is, for him, the totality of Satan's city, including bad Christians. In short, the Apocalypse is, for him, the world-long contest of the two cities. The only

criticism we might, with Father Allo, make is that Augustine is still too near the Roman Empire for it to have sunk, as it should, into its due place as but an incident in the enormous struggle.

Enough really has been said to show at least a negative - that no system of interpretation was official in the Church, nor was any tradition in the technical sense established. Nor did the subsequent centuries, in the Greek or the Latin world, succeed in doing so, though let us make it quite clear that nearly all Catholic writers have *expected* a personal "Antichrist," and not one of them has *excluded* the idea of a personal Antichrist; nor, indeed, can we see how they could possibly, or (as we have said) appropriately do so. Certainly *we* do not.

The really new start was made in the twelfth century when the Abbot Joachim of Flora, among much that was good, fell into the fatal innovation of supposing that the Apocalypse describes successive ages of Church history. The fourth period, for example, is that of the Ascetics (Apocalypse 11:19-14) who are attracted by Mohammed, or Islam generally, whose wound, inflicted by the Crusades, was cured when Saladin re-took Jerusalem. The sixth period is that in which Joachim himself is living, and is to contain the destruction of the Germanic empire by Asiatic chiefs, to whom a way was opened (the Euphrates dried up) by the defeat of the army of Frederick Barbarossa in the third Crusade. His successors became even more fantastic, and it was they who started to see Antichrist in the person of certain Popes. This idea was taken up by the precursors of Protestantism, like Wyclif and Hus, and from now on the poor book becomes the prey of what is almost like insanity. In 1522 Luther himself did not admit the Apocalypse to be a genuine prophecy; but he began to do so in proportion as he found in it weapons against the Papacy. English and Scotch

writers went even further along this line, Brightman (1616) reserving the Last Plagues for the benefit of the Jesuits, and of Bellarmine in particular. The real renaissance of scientific study of the book took place in Spain in the sixteenth century, and the Jesuits themselves were largely responsible for it, especially Alcazar, 1614 and 1619, and Mariana, about the same time. Modern criticism has been either historical and sane, or quite fantastic in its dismemberment of the book and its assigning of the fragments to different authors; but none of it bears directly on our subject. It is, however, very clear to our thinking that there is *no* Catholic tradition necessitating our adopting any particular view of the Antichrist, and that the periods which have shown the strongest inclination to fasten his identity on to this or that person, have been precisely the ones when scientific criticism flourished least. Moreover, we recognize that there is every temptation to seek for such identifications, in so far as they are always more exciting and picturesque than more profound and spiritual considerations.

To sum up. Outside the sacred text there is nothing that can be of any real value to us in our study of this subject. The Book of Daniel represents under the image of four wild beasts, four successive empires which, because they were the enemies of God's people were foes no less of god. The last of these produces a king who triumphs over the people to such an extent that he can set up an idolatrous image in the Temple itself. This image represents himself under the features of the supreme pagan god. The persecution period lasts three and a half years, after which God triumphs, and the End of the World is described as the consummation of His triumph. We considered Daniel, no less than Isaiah and Ezekiel, to see bind these concrete personages a wider view - that of the world-long struggle of good and evil, ending in the Victory of God. Towards the Christian era, "apocalypses" began to be written, in which this theme was developed, the

enemy of God, or of His Christ, being regarded as a pagan prince, or as Satan incarnate. After the Christian era, all these lines of speculation poured together, for a space, into the personality of Nero risen. Christian writers, outside the New Testament, lent themselves more or less to these speculations without really basing themselves on, or constructing, a "tradition." Within the New Testament the clearest references are our Lord's own words - when He says that there shall be many false Christs before the End, and also sees and describes the End through, so to say, the disaster of the taking of Jerusalem by Rome; and, the words of Saint John in his epistles where alone the word "Antichrist" is used. Here he definitely says that whatever the Christians may have heard about Antichrist, Antichrist is already present - in the person of all those who deny Christ, especially apostates. Saint Paul, while insisting that the date of the End is and must be unknown, also says that it cannot come till much has happened first. Elsewhere he includes in these happenings the conversion of the Jews, itself preceded by that of the Gentiles. He says that the Spirit of Revolt is already active but checked for the present; that when there is an "apostasy" then its full force shall be able to reveal itself, and that this will happen when the "check" is in some way removed. We saw reason to think that Saint Paul might possibly have his eye upon some contemporary situation - the tendency of the Empire to substitute itself in the person of the Emperor, for God; at present, this had not fully happened. But Saint Paul also sees the matter in far more general terms, his persons become abstractions, operating throughout history, and the ultimate forces are even spiritual altogether - Satan and his great enemy, Michael.

Saint John, in many symbols throughout the Apocalypse, teaches the self-same thing. Ever is there an anti-God - ever a struggle - it may be this Emperor or that who demands of the Christians of his age that they should worship him; it

may be a collectivity of such Emperors, making up the whole history of the Roman Empire; it may be successive Empires or other such dominant forces throughout Christian history. Ever Michael is fighting with the Dragon; ever the Witnesses are being seemingly destroyed and then reviving by the breath of God; ever the Beast is being wounded to death, but the wound of his death is healed. Whether, when the world's history has gathered to its climax, the Antagonist is to be represented by one man, or one system of government or of thought, matters very little, and we cannot assert. But precisely as John generalizes his vision to take in more than the Empire of his day, the less does he assign anything that we can legitimately tie down to no human or diabolic personality.

The upshot of this is not to make us careless. We have to obey the reiterated command - to Watch. More subtle influences surround us and sap out loyalty than any mere visible persecutor, whether open and ravaging undisguisedly, or veiled in some likeness of reason or philanthropy - that "angel of light," as whom we are told Satan can disguise himself. The fierce materialistic atheism of a generation ago has been succeeded by a vague semi-mystical, quasi-spiritual tendency that does not refuse to use the names that Religion has always used; this spurious Universalism that speaks so fair is perhaps today the most dangerous of the Beasts that attack and hate us. The Parody of the Church! The false internationalism that masquerades as the truer Catholicism; the disregard of all fixed beliefs and codes that engineers a lying Unity; the ethical enthusiasm that seeks to replace supernatural holiness; the theosophical continuity that is fain to join hands which ancient errors and cults, and to reduce historic Christianity to being but a phase, a momentary expression of the mind of man when it muses upon God.

We have not to tremble at the thought of some future horrible revelation that may never come in our day; nor yet have we to lap ourselves in false security precisely because it has *not* yet come. Already the "Mystery of Revolt" is active. Already there are many "Antichrists." Let us watch lest unawares we be caught up into our own Apostasy.

About This EBook

The text of this ebook is taken from the booklet *Antichrist* by Father Cyril Charles Martindale, S.J., published March 1924 by *The Catholic Truth Society*, London, England. A scan of the original booklet is available at [Lux Occulta](#).

The cover image is a detail from the 15th-century print *Antichrist* by Albrecht Durer.

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